# विकास

# VIKAS

## A Journal of Development

वर्ष ४२ – अंक २ – २०८३, जेठ

Vol. 42 - No. 2 - June, 2026

नेपाल सरकार

राष्ट्रिय योजना आयोग

सिंहदरबार, काठमाडौं

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प्रकाशन प्रति : २०० ।

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## सम्पादकीय

तीव्र आर्थिक विकास, गुणस्तरीय र पूर्वानुमानयोग्य सार्वजनिक सेवा, पारदर्शी शासन प्रणाली, आधुनिक गुणस्तरीय पूर्वाधार, स्वदेशमै रोजगारीका अवसर तथा उद्यमशील वातावरण बनाइराख्नु आजको आवश्यकता हो।नव युवाको आन्दोलन पश्चात सम्पन्न निर्वाचनले राजनीतिक स्थायित्व प्राप्त गरेसँगै देश आर्थिक उन्नयन र सामाजिक रुपान्तरणको महत्वपूर्ण संघारमा उभिएको छ। तिब्रतर रुपमा विकास भएको विश्वव्यापी आर्थिक सामाजिक रुपान्तरण, अन्तर निर्भरता, साझा चुनौती र एकीकृत प्रयासले गर्दा विकासका आयाम र आयतन विस्तारित हुदै गएको छ। विकास प्रकृया बहुआयामीक रूपान्तरणको एकीकृत अभियान बन्न पुगेको छ।

विकासको व्यापक दृष्टिकोणलाई आत्मसात् गर्दै विकासका नवीनतम मूल्य, अवधारणा, अभ्यास तथा अनुभवलाई समेटी विज्ञहरूको राय, अनुसन्धान र विश्लेषण सहित विकास पत्रिकाको प्रकाशन आरम्भ गरिएको हो। यस पत्रिकाले विकास सम्बन्धी समसामयिक बहस, नीति संवाद, अनुसन्धानमूलक विचार तथा व्यवहारिक अनुभवलाई साझा गर्दै विकासको ज्ञान व्यवस्थापनलाई थप समृद्ध बनाउने अपेक्षा राखिएको छ। विकासका चुनौती र अवसरको वस्तुगत विश्लेषणमार्फत राष्ट्रिय विकास बहसलाई थप उन्नत र परिणाममुखी बनाउन सहयोगी बन्ने अपेक्षा गरिएको छ।

सुशासन, गुणस्तरीय सार्वजनिक सेवा तथा परिणाममुखी विकास र व्यवस्थापनको माग तीव्र रूपमा अघि बढिरहेको वर्तमान परिप्रेक्ष्यमा नवयुवाहरूले अवसर खोज्ने मात्र होइन, अवसर सिर्जना गर्ने वातावरण पनि चाहिरहेका छन। त्यसैले विश्वसँग प्रतिस्पर्धा गर्न सक्ने मानव पूँजी निर्माण गर्न उद्यमशीलता प्रवर्द्धन, नवप्रवर्तनको प्रोत्साहन, स्टार्टअप इकोसिस्टमको विकास, सीपमूलक शिक्षा तथा ज्ञानमा आधारित अर्थतन्त्र निर्माण जस्ता बिषय विकास नीतिको केन्द्रमा रहनुपर्छ। युवाको ऊर्जा, सिर्जनशीलता र नवप्रवर्तन क्षमतालाई विकास प्रक्रियामा समाहित गर्न सकेमा मात्र विकासले गति र गन्तब्य पहिल्यान सक्नेछ।

विकास पत्रिकामा प्रकाशित हुने विश्लेषणात्मक लेखहरूले विकासका विविध आयाममाथि नवीन दृष्टिकोण प्रस्तुत गरेका छन। यस्ता लेखहरू विकास नीतिको समीक्षा, नयाँ सम्भावनाको खोजी, अन्तर्राष्ट्रिय अभ्यासको विश्लेषण तथा राष्ट्रिय आवश्यकता अनुरूपका समाधानहरूको खोजीमा केन्द्रित रहनेछन्। पत्रिकामा व्यक्त विचार, सुझाव र निष्कर्ष सम्बन्धित लेखकका स्वतन्त्र तथा विज्ञ धारणा हुन्। विचार हरूको विविधताले नै स्वस्थ बौद्धिक बहसलाई प्रोत्साहित गर्छ र तथ्यमा आधारित नीति सुधारका लागि परिपक्क दृष्टिकोणको विकासमा सहयोग पुग्दछ। यस पत्रिका विकासप्रेमी, शोधकर्ता, नीति विश्लेषक, योजनाकार, शैक्षिक समुदाय तथा विकास व्यवस्थापनसँग सम्बन्धित सम्पूर्ण सरोकारवालाहरूका लागि उपयोगी सामग्री बन्ने विश्वास गरिएको छ। ज्ञानको निर्माण, हस्तान्तरण र उपयोग मार्फत विकासको गुणस्तर अभिवृद्धि गर्ने प्रयासमा यो प्रकाशन सहयोगी बन्ने अपेक्षा लिईएको छ। प्राप्त सुझाव, प्रतिक्रिया र अनुभवका आधारमा आगामी दिनमा यसलाई अझ परिस्कृत, समसामयिक र उपयोगी बनाउँदै लगिनेछ।

यस पत्रिकामा प्रकाशित लेख रचनामा व्यक्त विचार तथा धारणा सम्बन्धित लेखकका निजी हुन् । यस सम्बन्धमा लेखक स्वयम् जिम्मेवार हुनुहुनेछ । लेख रचनाहरुमा व्यक्त विचारले यस आयोगको आधिकारिक धारणा प्रतिनिधित्व नगर्ने र यस सम्बन्धमा राष्ट्रिय योजना आयोग तथा सम्पादक मण्डल जवाफदेही नहुने व्यहोरा सम्बन्धित सबैमा जानकारी गराइन्छ ।

-सम्पादक मण्डल

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# Civic Engagement and State Responsiveness in Nepal: A Policy Analysis of Youth Participation

✍ **Sandip Sapkota**[13*]

**Abstract:**

*Nepal's transition to a federal democratic republic has created both opportunities and challenges for civic engagement, particularly among its youth population. This article examines the relationship between youth civic participation and state responsiveness within Nepal's evolving governance architecture. Drawing on secondary data from the Nepal Planning Commission, Central Bureau of Statistics, and international development organizations, the article critically analyzes existing institutional mechanisms for youth engagement at the federal, provincial, and local levels. The analysis reveals significant structural gaps between the constitutional provisions for youth participation and their practical implementation, compounded by high youth out-migration, unemployment, and eroding public trust in governance institutions. Using frameworks of participatory governance, policy responsiveness, and public accountability, the article argues that meaningful civic engagement requires not only institutional reforms but also attitudinal shifts within the state apparatus. The article concludes with concrete policy recommendations aimed at strengthening youth participation in development planning, improving feedback loops between citizens and the state, and enhancing institutional capacity for inclusive governance. These recommendations are directly aligned with the priorities articulated in Nepal's Sixteenth Periodic Plan (2024–2029) and the Sustainable Development Goals.*

**Keywords:** *civic engagement, youth participation, state responsiveness, participatory governance, federal governance, policy analysis.*

## 1. Background

Nepal's political landscape has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past two decades. The end of a decade-long armed conflict in 2006, the formal abolition of the monarchy in 2008, and the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal in 2015 collectively established the foundation for a federal democratic republic premised on inclusive governance, social justice, and participatory development. Central to this constitutional vision is the meaningful engagement of citizens, particularly youth, in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of public policies at all tiers of government.

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Youth constitutes a critical demographic in Nepal. According to the National Population and Housing Census 2021 conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), approximately 40 per cent of Nepal's population falls within the 15–35 age bracket, making youth the largest cohort in the national demographic profile (CBS, 2022). Yet this demographic dividend remains largely untapped. The Sixteenth Periodic Plan (2024–2029) of the National Planning Commission acknowledges youth as central actors in achieving Nepal's aspirations to graduate from Least Developed Country (LDC) status and attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. However, translating constitutional mandates and planning commitments into meaningful youth inclusion in practice remains a persistent governance challenge (NPC, 2023).

Nepal's federal governance architecture, comprising the federal government, seven provincial governments, and 753 local governments, was envisioned as a mechanism for bringing governance closer to citizens and enhancing participatory decision-making. The Local Government Operation Act 2017 and the National Youth Policy 2015 formally mandate youth participation in local planning cycles, ward-level consultations, and social audits. Yet empirical evidence suggests that institutional participation of youth in governance processes remains largely symbolic rather than substantive. Youth councils at local levels are often under-resourced, and their recommendations rarely feed into formal budgetary and planning processes (UNDP Nepal, 2021).

Several structural challenges compound the problem. Nepal's youth unemployment rate stands at approximately 19.2 percent, while youth underemployment is significantly higher, creating conditions of economic precarity that undermine active civic participation (ILO, 2023). The Nepal Labour Migration Report 2022 estimates that approximately 500,000 Nepalis—predominantly young men—depart for foreign employment annually, representing a significant drain on civic human capital (MoLE, 2022). This mass out-migration has dual consequences: it reduces the pool of civically active youth within the country, and it signals a profound crisis of confidence in domestic governance institutions to provide economic security and opportunity.

Public trust in government institutions has also declined notably. The Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2023 ranked Nepal at 108th out of 180 countries, reflecting persistent concerns about governance quality, service delivery, and accountability (Transparency International, 2023). The World Bank's Governance Indicators place Nepal in the lower percentiles for government effectiveness and rule of law, suggesting that state responsiveness to citizen demands—including those of youth—remains structurally constrained (World Bank, 2023). Against this backdrop, understanding the mechanisms through which civic engagement can improve state

responsiveness becomes not merely an academic exercise but an urgent policy imperative.

## 2. Analysis

### *2.1 Theoretical Framework: Participatory Governance and Policy Responsiveness*

The relationship between civic engagement and state responsiveness is theorised through several complementary frameworks. Arnstein's (1969) seminal ladder of citizen participation offers a normative typology ranging from manipulation to citizen control, providing a useful heuristic for assessing the quality of youth participation in Nepal's governance processes. More recent scholarship by Fung (2006) on democratic theory emphasizes that participation must be linked to tangible decision-making power if it is to generate meaningful outcomes. Participation that exists only at the level of consultation, without corresponding institutional obligations on the state to respond, produces what Gaventa (2004) terms a 'participation trap'—a condition in which citizens invest time and resources in governance processes that yield no observable policy change.

Policy responsiveness, understood as the degree to which government policies align with citizen preferences and demands, is a foundational concept in democratic theory (Dahl, 1971). In the context of developing democracies such as Nepal, responsiveness is often mediated by institutional capacity, political will, and the organisational density of civil society. Ostrom's (1990) work on institutional collective action suggests that robust civic institutions can reduce transaction costs and improve the flow of information between citizens and the state, thereby enhancing policy responsiveness. Applied to Nepal's governance context, this framework underscores the importance of strengthening local-level institutions—ward offices, youth councils, and social audit committees—as intermediary structures that connect youth voices to state action.

Public accountability theory, as articulated by Fox (2015), distinguishes between 'answerability'—the obligation of public officials to explain their decisions—and 'enforceability'—the capacity of citizens to impose sanctions on unresponsive actors. Nepal's formal accountability architecture includes constitutional bodies such as the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA), the Office of the Auditor General, and parliamentary oversight committees. However, youth-specific feedback mechanisms within these structures remain underdeveloped, limiting the ability of young citizens to hold the state accountable for governance outcomes that directly affect them.

### *2.2 Institutional Mechanisms for Youth Civic Engagement*

Nepal's legal and institutional framework provides a relatively strong normative foundation for youth civic participation. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees the fundamental right to participation in state affairs and mandates proportional inclusion of youth, women, and marginalised communities in state organs. The National Youth Policy 2015 defines youth as persons aged 16–40 and establishes the Youth and Small Enterprises Self-Employment Fund as a financial mechanism for youth economic empowerment. The Local Government Operation Act 2017 further mandates the formation of ward-level citizen assemblies and social audit committees, within which youth representation is nominally ensured.

At the federal level, the Youth and Sports Ministry serves as the primary institutional locus for youth policy coordination, though its budget allocation remains modest relative to the scale of the youth population and the breadth of its mandate. The Sixteenth Periodic Plan allocates specific targets for youth employment generation, skills development, and entrepreneurship promotion, recognising youth as central agents of productive transformation. However, as UNDP Nepal (2021) notes, the vertical integration between federal policy frameworks and local-level implementation remains weak, resulting in significant implementation gaps.

At the provincial level, the governance architecture for youth engagement is still nascent. Six of Nepal's seven provinces have established provincial-level youth coordination councils, but their operational autonomy, financial resources, and technical capacity remain limited. A study by the Asia Foundation (2022) found that provincial youth councils in Nepal meet infrequently, lack dedicated staff, and have limited influence over provincial planning processes. This institutional fragility at the meso-level creates a significant gap in the civic engagement architecture, as provincial governments are responsible for many policy domains—including agriculture, education, and social welfare—that most directly affect youth livelihoods.

Local governments represent perhaps the most promising arena for meaningful youth civic engagement, given their constitutional mandate for participatory planning and their proximity to citizens. The Local Government Operation Act 2017 requires local governments to conduct annual planning consultations with ward-level citizens, including a specific provision for youth participation. Several municipalities—including Pokhara Metropolitan City and Lalitpur Metropolitan City—have developed innovative youth engagement mechanisms, including youth budget tagging and digital consultation platforms. These examples demonstrate the feasibility of institutionalising

youth participation at the local level, but they remain isolated cases rather than systematic practice across all 753 local governments.

### *2.3 Gaps in Policy Implementation and Coordination*

Despite the formal institutional framework for youth civic engagement, significant implementation gaps persist. These can be categorised into four interrelated dimensions: resource inadequacy, coordination failure, information asymmetry, and cultural barriers.

Resource inadequacy is the most immediately apparent challenge. A study by Freedom Forum Nepal (2022) found that 68 percent of ward-level youth councils surveyed reported insufficient funding to conduct regular activities, while 74 percent indicated they lacked dedicated technical staff to facilitate civic engagement processes. This resource deficit is compounded by the fact that many local governments—particularly in rural and remote areas—have limited own-source revenue and are heavily dependent on conditional grants from the federal government, reducing their fiscal space for discretionary youth programming.

Coordination failure is a systemic challenge within Nepal's intergovernmental relations system. The Ministry of Youth and Sports, the National Youth Council, and various line ministries all have overlapping mandates related to youth development, but there is no single coordinating mechanism to ensure coherence across these institutions. The absence of a consolidated youth data system means that different agencies use different definitions of 'youth,' different age brackets, and different indicators, making it difficult to track progress or identify implementation gaps. The NPC's Sixteenth Periodic Plan acknowledges this coordination deficit and calls for the establishment of an integrated youth development monitoring framework, though its operationalisation remains pending.

Information asymmetry between citizens and the state is a fundamental barrier to effective civic engagement. Research by Martin Chautari (2022) found that fewer than 30 percent of youth in rural municipalities were aware of their rights to participate in ward-level planning consultations, and fewer than 15 percent had ever attended a social audit hearing. This information gap is not simply a communication failure; it reflects deeper structural inequalities in which civic information and participation opportunities are disproportionately accessible to educated, urban, and socially connected youth, while marginalised groups—including Dalit youth, indigenous youth, and young women—remain systematically excluded.

Cultural barriers to youth civic participation operate at both the institutional and social levels. Within government institutions, a hierarchical and seniority-based organisational culture can marginalise youth voices, even when formal participation mechanisms exist. Youth participants in consultative processes frequently report that their contributions are not taken seriously by senior officials, that decisions appear predetermined, and that there is little visible follow-through on the recommendations they submit. These experiences of procedural injustice reduce youth motivation to engage in future participatory processes, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of disengagement (UNDP Nepal, 2021).

### *2.4 Digital Civic Engagement: Opportunities and Limitations*

The rapid growth of digital connectivity in Nepal presents significant new opportunities for youth civic engagement. As of 2023, Nepal's internet penetration rate has reached approximately 63 percent, with mobile broadband accounting for the majority of connections (Nepal Telecommunications Authority, 2023). Social media platforms—particularly Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok—have become important spaces for political expression, public debate, and civic mobilisation among Nepali youth. Several significant episodes of youth-led civic mobilisation in recent years, including the #NayaSadak movement and various anti-corruption campaigns have demonstrated the potential of digital platforms to aggregate youth voices and create pressure for policy change.

Several government agencies have piloted e-governance initiatives aimed at enhancing citizen participation. The National Information Technology Centre has developed the Nagarik App platform to facilitate citizen access to government services, while several local governments have experimented with online budget consultation portals. However, these digital engagement initiatives face significant limitations. The digital divide between urban and rural areas, between men and women, and between different socioeconomic groups means that digitally mediated civic engagement may reinforce existing inequalities rather than democratise participation. Sussman and Galizio (2020) caution that digital participation mechanisms, if not carefully designed, can create an illusion of inclusivity while systematically marginalising those with limited digital access and literacy.

Furthermore, the translation of digital civic expression into tangible policy outcomes remains an unresolved challenge. While social media can amplify youth voices and generate public attention on governance issues, the mechanisms through which digital civic engagement feeds into formal policy processes are largely undefined. Nepal lacks an institutionalised framework for monitoring citizen feedback on digital platforms and

incorporating it into policy cycles, which limits the policy impact of digital civic engagement.

### *2.5 Youth Participation in Development Planning: Evidence and Trends*

The integration of youth perspectives in Nepal's national development planning processes has historically been limited. The process of formulating the Sixteenth Periodic Plan (2024–2029) incorporated a series of consultative workshops with youth organisations and civil society groups, representing an incremental improvement over previous planning cycles. However, an assessment by the Institute for Integrated Development Studies (IIDS, 2023) found that youth-specific recommendations from these consultations were only partially reflected in the final plan document, and that the mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of youth-related targets remain underdeveloped.

At the local level, several innovative examples of youth participation in development planning merit attention. The Budhanilkantha Municipality in Kathmandu District implemented a Youth Participatory Budgeting initiative in fiscal year 2022/23, allocating 5 percent of its discretionary development budget to projects identified and prioritised by youth through a structured deliberative process. Early evidence suggests that this initiative not only produced relevant projects—including public spaces, skills training centers, and community libraries—but also significantly increased youth awareness of local governance processes and improved their trust in municipal institutions (Asia Foundation, 2022). Such local-level innovations represent important proof-of-concept demonstrations that can inform broader policy design.

International evidence reinforces the value of institutionalised youth participation in development planning. UNDP's 2021 Youth Strategy notes that countries with formal mechanisms for youth participation in national planning processes exhibit higher rates of SDG progress, lower rates of youth unemployment, and stronger public trust in governance institutions. In the South Asian context, Bangladesh's National Youth Policy 2017 and Sri Lanka's National Youth Policy 2014 provide regional benchmarks for institutionalised youth engagement, though both face implementation challenges analogous to those confronting Nepal.

## 3. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This article has examined the relationship between youth civic engagement and state responsiveness in Nepal through an analysis of the institutional framework, implementation gaps, and emerging trends in participatory governance. The analysis reveals a persistent structural disconnect between Nepal's constitutional commitments

to inclusive governance and the lived realities of youth participation in decision-making processes. While the formal architecture for youth civic engagement is relatively well-developed, its effectiveness is undermined by resource inadequacy, coordination failure, information asymmetry, cultural barriers to participation, and weak accountability mechanisms.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the domain of youth policy. As Nepal navigates the complex challenges of federal consolidation, LDC graduation, and post-pandemic economic recovery, the effective mobilisation of youth as stakeholders and agents in development planning will be decisive for achieving national development targets. Civic engagement is not merely a normative aspiration of democratic governance; it is a functional requirement for the production of responsive, effective, and legitimate public policy.

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following policy recommendations are advanced:

### *3.1 Strengthening Youth Participation in Governance*

- Enact dedicated Youth Civic Participation legislation that operationalises constitutional provisions, defines minimum standards for youth consultation in planning cycles, and establishes enforceable timelines for government response to youth inputs.
- Institutionalise Youth Participatory Budgeting at the local government level through national guidelines from the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration (MoFAGA), building on successful municipal pilots and scaling to all 753 local governments within the Sixteenth Plan period.
- Reform ward-level citizen assembly processes to ensure substantive rather than tokenistic youth representation, including mandatory training for ward officials on inclusive facilitation techniques and youth-sensitive governance practices.
- Establish dedicated youth desks within all provincial planning commissions with adequate staffing, technical resources, and formal mandates to ensure youth perspectives are integrated into provincial planning processes.

### *3.2 Improving State Responsiveness*

- Develop standardised citizen feedback mechanisms at all government tiers, including structured protocols for acknowledging youth inputs, communicating government responses, and tracking the implementation of adopted recommendations.

- Establish an integrated youth data system under the NPC to harmonise definitions, indicators, and monitoring frameworks across ministries, enabling evidence-based tracking of youth development outcomes and participatory governance effectiveness.
- Incorporate youth responsiveness indicators into the annual performance assessment framework for local and provincial governments, creating institutional incentives for improving civic engagement quality.

### *3.3 Enhancing Institutional Capacity and Accountability*

- Substantially increase budget allocations for ward-level youth councils and ensure minimum funding guarantees through the intergovernmental fiscal transfer system, enabling councils to conduct regular civic activities, training programs, and consultative processes.
- Develop a National Digital Civic Engagement Framework that establishes standards for online public consultation, ensures digital inclusion through targeted outreach to marginalised groups, and creates structured pathways for translating digital citizen feedback into policy cycles.
- Launch a national civic education programme - delivered through secondary schools, universities, and community learning centres - to build youth knowledge of governance rights, participation mechanisms, and accountability tools.
- Strengthen civil society organisations working on youth civic engagement through an enabling regulatory environment, capacity development grants, and formal recognition as implementing partners in government programs.

These recommendations collectively aim to move Nepal's youth civic engagement framework from its current state of procedural inclusivity toward a model of substantive participation in which youth voices meaningfully shape public policy outcomes. Achieving this transition will require not only institutional reforms but also sustained political commitment at all levels of government. The Sixteenth Periodic Plan provides an important policy window for this transformation, and its success will be a critical test of Nepal's commitment to the democratic, inclusive, and responsive governance that the Constitution of Nepal promises to all its citizens.

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